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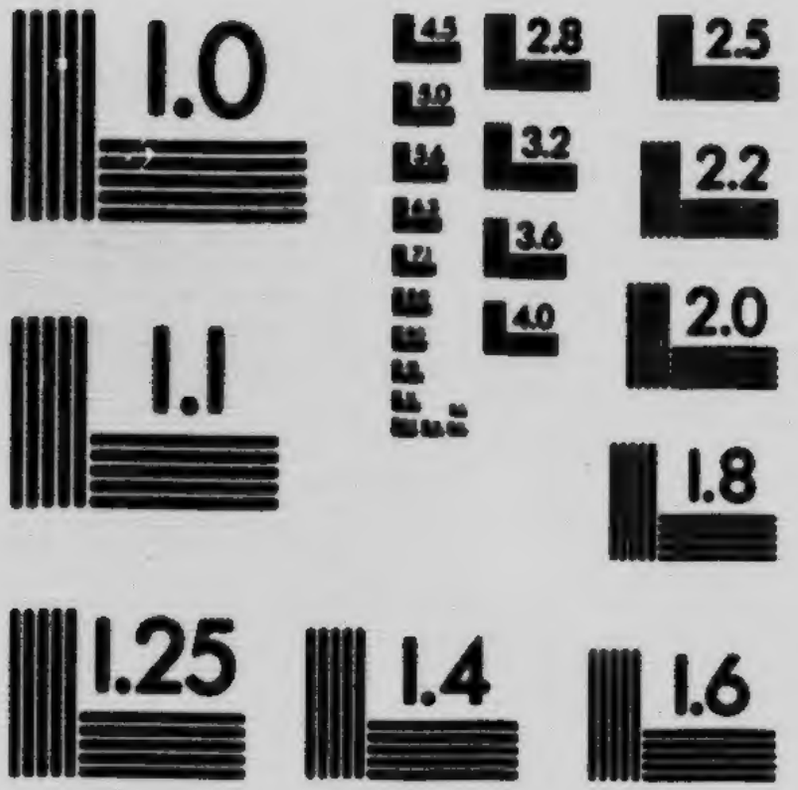

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FRENCH-CANADIAN LITERATURE.

BY

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TRANSACTIONS R.S.L., VOL. XXVI.

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FRENCH-CANADIAN LITERATURE.

BY W. D. LIGHTHALL, M.A., F.R.S.L.

WHEN I promised to contribute a paper on the literature of the French Canadians I fell upon an evil hour, for that which makes cowards of us all soon extracted the confession that I was ill equipped to render the necessary justice. All my life I have had to deal with this people, their language, and their institutions, and still I hold that no man who is not born to a speech can judge it with perfect [illegible] truth. It has seemed to me, therefore, that [illegible] of attempting the whole subject, I should [illegible] no pretence at anything but some personal impressions and considerations, in the hope of lending the reader my own pair of spectacles.

In a former paper before this Society I advanced some ideas on the conditions of colonial literatures. The same principles apply to French-Canadian writing. It is an outgrowth of the application of the instinct of art in its form of the literary art, to a new and distinctive field of scenes and emotions.

In 1608 Champlain founded Quebec. During his generation the tiny population were chiefly birds of

passage—sailors and traders. By 1680 some ten thousand souls had become rooted in the country, who comprised the bulk of the ancestors of the French-Canadian people, since there was little subsequent immigration. They were a simple, hardy, merry, sociable folk, absolutely illiterate, highly superstitious, very poor in artificial luxuries, but living comfortably on the riches of wild nature. They cleared the forests around the log huts, journeyed far on the wide St. Lawrence and the great rivers, lived ever in peril of savage foes, sang, danced, trapped, traded, obeyed the curé implicitly in two thirds of their lives, and in the other third some simple rustic squire not much better equipped in any way than themselves. Naturally they believed in the sole efficacy of the Catholic religion and the proud superiority of the French race, and held that *Gesta Dei per Francos.*

After this time there was little immigration, but they grew and multiplied at the amazing rate common to all colonial populations of America. For seventy years (from 1690 to 1760) they were engaged in more or less warfare with the heretical British colonies, and had plenty of small successes, Indian fashion, and, under Count Frontenac at the beginning and the Marquis of Montcalm towards the end, several glorious victories.

In 1759–60 Quebec and Montreal fell, and this little band who had fought so long and well for France passed under George III.

They represented a lost cause; but it was no common cause—it was a vast dream of empire and a heroic record of struggle and exploration. In

our contest with them for North America we must remember that we won by only a neck. They represented no common race, but one without a peer for ages in the history of Europe and of civilisation; their est were the flower of chivalry, and their mother tongue was the favourite instrument of elegance and culture. Strong attachment to their origin, faith, and history were, therefore, to be expected.

Their number at this period was about seventy thousand. Under the British *régime* they found unexpected liberty and good treatment, and as the circumstances of incoming immigration have been such as to leave them alone for the most part, at least in the rural districts, they have grown up alone, until recent years, retaining their language and developing their own life.

Their numbers to-day in the Province of Quebec are about 1,300,000, while considerable groups are scattered through the Eastern States and the other provinc of Canada. They comprise about 25 per cent. o. the total population.

A racial hope of one day forming a separate French Catholic State was strongly cherished amongst them until recently, and is still a dream of *exaltés*. At the present time it is restricted by most of their leaders to the sensible hope of occupying a position of respect and influence in the Dominion. Under the Fr nch *régime* they had no literature, because no press and no educated men, except a few priests and officials from France. Interesting journals of military service and those of discoverers and various memorials there were. Innumerable

chansons, inherited from France or spontaneously composed in the parishes, were the only nucleus of artistic expression. There were, it is true, Messire Dollier de Casson's 'Histoire de Montréal,' Père Charlevoix's 'Histoire de la Nouvelle France,' and the 'Relations' of the Jesuits and other missionaries, but these were not indigenous to the country.

From 1760 to 1830 almost the only products of the press were a few books of law and religion and some political tracts. The Church did not favour general education, as unfavourable to obedience. The first history, a school text-book, was published in 1833, by the lawyer Jacques François Perrault, the devoted father of common school education among his people. To no man do the French-Canadians owe a greater debt. But I have no intention of entering into the minutiæ of the bibliography, as they are not of general interest. Sufficient be it that a long period of political agitation culminated in a rebellion in 1837, which was soon followed by a real literary awakening, the commencement being the publication of Garneau's 'History of Canada,' in 1845. I shall but deal with four of the most striking names up to our own day, representing aspects of the little school, the poets Crémazie and Fréchette, and the historians Garneau and Sulte.

In style and points of form there is nothing to be learned from them. In these matters they carry a heavy handicap of provinciality. It is the subject and sentiment which have an interest, as the reflex of their unusual world, interior and exterior. Still, it is well to observe that in form Crémazie is of the

school of Lamartine, Fréchette of Hugo. Octave Crémazie, generally regarded as the most poetical of the French-Canadian poets, was born at Quebec in 1827, the grandson of a soldier of Montcalm. He carried on the avocation of a bookseller there, where his shop was a resort of the choice spirits about 1860, at the time of literary awakening. He died in France in 1877, after an exile of sixteen years, produced by certain incidents of a disastrous failure. Absorbed in his thoughts, his nature was usually sober and melancholy, although he had wit, logic, and learning. His misfortunes deepened his natural tendency. In 1882 a handsome volume containing his "Oeuvres Complètes," was issued by his friends. Opening it at the poem "On the Ruins of Sebastopol," I find this apostrophe to France:

"Terre de nos aïeux, o sublime contrée!
Toi dont nous conservons la memoire sacrée,
Comme ton nom est grand parmi les nations!
Et pareille à l'etoile étincelant dans l'ombre,
Les peuples égarés au sein de la nuit sombre,
Retrouvent leur chemin au feu de tes rayons.

"O phare lumineux allumé par Dieu même.
Tu portes sur ton front, ainsi qu'un diadème,
Deux astres radieux, le courage et l'honneur.
Quand l'erreur et le mal bouleversent le monde,
Pour voiler leur éclat en vain l'orage gronde,
Ils conservent toujours leur force et leur splendeur.

"O foyer de la gloire! o terre du genie!
Toi que tous les grands cœurs adoptent pour patrie,
Toi que les nations invoquent dans leurs maux:
Du droit et de la foi pionnier volontaire,
Tu sais toujours mêler, pour féconder la terre,
Le sang de tes martyrs au sang de tes héros.

* * * *

"O Canadïens-Français! comme notre ame est fière
De pouvoir dire a tous: La France, c'est ma mère:
Sa gloire se reflète au front de son enfant.
Glorieux de son nom que nous portons encore,
Sa joie ou sa douleur trouve un écho sonore
Aux bords du Saint-Laurent."

These lines are preceded by a happy reference to the Crimean *entente cordiale.*

"De France et d'Albion l'union fraternelle
Toujours saura briser ta force qui chancelle.
Qui pourrait résister a leur glaive vengeur?
Albion sur les mers commande en souveraine:
La France, des combats noble et sublime reine,
Un jour soumit le monde à son drapeau vainqueur."

In 1855 a French corvette, *La Capricieuse,* visited Quebec. It was the first visit of the kind since the cession of the province in 1763, and he gave voice to the emotions of his countrymen in "Le Vieux Soldat Canadien," in which he pictures the event as causing the shade of an old soldier of France to return upon the ramparts:

"Voyez sur les remparts cette forme indécise,
Agitée et tremblante au souffle de la brise:
C'est le vieux Canadien à son poste rendu:
Le canon de la France a réveillé cette ombre,
Qui vient, sortant soudain de sa demeure sombre,
Saluer le drapeau si longtemps attendu.

"Et le vieux soldat croit, illusion touchante;
Que la France, longtemps de nos rives absente,
Y ramène aujourd'hui ses guerriers triomphants,
Et que sur notre fleuve elle est encor maîtresse."

His most popular poem is "Le Drapeau de Carillon," a title which has reference to the banner

of General Montcalm, and the successful defence of the position called by the French "Carillon" and by the British "Ticonderoga." The piece opens with the words:

"Pensez-vous quelquefois à ces temps glorieux
Où seuls, abandonnés par la France leur mère,
Nos aïeux défendaient son nom victorieux
Et voyaient devant eux fuir l'armée étrangère ?"

It then describes the time of the story.

"Montcalm était tombé comme tombe un héros,
Enveloppant sa mort dans un rayon de gloire,
Au lieu même ou le chef des conquérants nouveaux,
Wolfe, avait rencontré la mort et la victoire.
Dans un effort suprême en vain nos vieux soldats
Cueillaient sous nos remparts des lauriers inutiles ;
Car un roi sans honneur avait livré leur bras,
Sans donner un regret à leurs plaintes stériles."

The standard-bearer who bore the flag preserved it for many years in secret. The old Canadians go to his cabin each Sunday after Mass and recount the deeds of the past. One evening he reveals to them a plan. He will go to France, bearing the glorious banner, tell the great king of "the sorrows of their sacrifice," and appeal to him with their cry of despair. He does so, but—

"Quand le pauvre soldat avec son vieux drapeau
Essaya de franchir les portes de Versailles,
Les lâches courtisans à cet hôte nouveau,
Qui parlait de 'nos gens,' de 'gloire,' de 'batailles,'
D''enfants abandonnés,' des nobles sentiments
Que notre cœur bénit et que le ciel protège,
Demandaient, en riant de ses tristes accents,
Ce qu'importaient au roi *quelques arpents de neige.*"

He returns heart-broken, and soon disappears from his home, and wanders towards the field of Carillon.

"Là, dans le sol glacé fixant un étendard,
Il déroulait au vent les couleurs de la France;
Planant sur l'horizon, son triste et long regard
Semblait trouver des lieux chéris de son enfance.
Sombre et silencieux il pleura bien longtemps,
Comme on pleure au tombeau d'une mère adorée,
Puis, à l'écho sonore envoyant ses accents,
Sa voix jeta le cri de son âme éplorée.

"'O Carillon, je te revois encore,
Non plus hélas: comme en ces jours bénis
Où dans tes murs la trompette sonore
Pour te sauver nous avait réunis.
Je viens à toi, quand mon âme succombe
Et sent déjà son courage faiblir.
Oui, près de toi, venant chercher ma tombe,
Pour mon drapeau je viens ici mourir.

"Mes compagnons, d'une vaine espérance
Berçant encor leurs coeurs toujours français.
Les yeux tournés du côté de la France,
Diront souvent: reviendront-ils jamais?

* * * * *

À quelques jours de là, passant sur la colline
A l'heure où le soleil à l'horizon s'incline,
Des paysans trouvaient un cadavre glacé
Couvert d'un drapeau blanc. Dans sa dernière étreinte
Il pressait sur son coeur cette relique sainte,
Qui nous redit encor la gloire du passé.

"O noble et vieux drapeau! dans ce grand jour de fête,
Où, marchant avec toi, tout un peuple s'apprête
À célébrer la France, à nos cœurs attendris
Quand tu viens raconter la valeur de nos pères,
Nos regards savent lire en brillants caractères
L'héroique poème enfermé dans tes plis.

Quand tu passes ainsi comme un rayon de flamme,
Ton aspect vénèré fait briller dans notre âme
Tout ce monde de gloire où vivaient nos aïeux.
Leurs grands jours de combats, leurs immortels faits d'armes,
Leurs efforts surhumains, leurs malheurs et leurs larmes,
Dans un rêve entrevus, passent devant nos yeux."

It is needless to characterise the deep passion of these lines. Nevertheless, he expresses more nearly the average French-Canadian sentiment of to-day in "Le Canada":

"Il est sous le soleil un sol unique au monde,
Où le ciel a versé ses dons les plus brillants,
Où, répandant ses biens, la nature féconde
A ses vastes forêts mêle ses lacs géants.

"Sur ces bords enchantés notre mère, la France,
A laissé de sa gloire un immortel sillon;
Précipitant ses flots vers l'Ocean immense,
Le noble Saint-Laurent redit encor son nom.

"Heureux qui le connait, plus heureux qui l'habite,
Et, ne quittant jamais pour chercher d'autres cieux
Les rives du grande fleuve où le bonheur l'invite,
Sait vivre et sait mourir où dorment ses aïeux."

Louis Honoré Fréchette was born in 1839, in Quebec, but has lived for many years in Montreal. His "Fleurs Boréales et Oiseaux de neige" was crowned by the French Academy in 1880, and awarded one of the annual Montholon prizes, an honour which produced great enthusiasm in the little world of his province, and caused him to be styled "poet laureate." Thereafter Fréchette has

been generally considered the "national poet" of his people, an appellation to which his ability appears to entitle him, and which it has been his effort to maintain. This ambition is embodied particularly in his long poem "La Légende d'un Peuple," a work aiming to be considered the epic of the race in America. If Crémazie was a singer of very few notes, though full of fire and passion, Fréchette, lacking the same degree of these qualities, has a considerably wider range and clearer purpose. Facile in attractive lyric and also excelling in dignified narrative, he has given more complete expression to the thought of his period than any of his fellows. If the French language should ultimately disappear in Canada, as seems to be its destiny, the "Légende" is likely to remain its principal poetical monument.

The state of opinion among the French-Canadians was not the same in 1887, when "La Légende" was published in Paris, as it is to-day. Causes unnecessary to analyse here had developed a considerable growth of separatism, which has now been much reduced. The recognition by the French Academy in 1880 of his 'Oiseaux de Neige' had made Fréchette surpassingly French. Hence the sentiment of his Dedication:

"À La France.

"Mère, je ne suis pas de ceux qui ont eu le bonheur d'être bercés sur tes genoux.

"Ce sont de bien lointains échos qui m'ont familiarisé avec ton nom et ta gloire.

"Ta belle langue, j'ai appris à la balbutier loin de toi.

"J'ose cependant, aujourd'hui, apporter une nouvelle page héroique à ton histoire déjà si belle et si chevaleresque.

"Cette page est ecrite plus avec le cœur qu'avec la plume.

"Je ne te demande pas, en retour, un embrassement maternel pour ton enfant, hélas! oublié.

"Mais permets-lui au moins de baiser, avec attendrissement et fierté, le bas de cette robe glorieuse *qu'il aurait tant aimé voir flotter auprès de son berceau.*"

Opening with some fine lines to America and Columbus,

"Le héros, qui rêvait d'enrichir un royaume,
De l'immense avenir ne vit que le fantôme,"

he proceeds to apostrophise the history of the early missionaries and discoverers:

"O notre histoire, écrin de perles ignorées—

* * * * *

Ce ne fut tout d'abord qu'un groupe, une poignée
De Bretons brandissant le sabre et la cognée,
Vieux loups de mer bronzés au vent de Saint-Malo.
Bercés depuis l'enfance entre le ciel et l'eau."

* * * * *

"Et puis, domptant les flots des grands lacs orageux,
Franchissant la savane et ses marais fangeux,
Pénétrant jusqu'au fond des forêts centenaires?
Voici nos découvreurs et nos missionnaires."

The feelings and deeds of Jacques Cartier, the discoverer of the St. Lawrence River, of Champlain, the founder of Quebec, and Maisoneuve, of Montreal, are expressed in stately lines. The harvest snatched in the midst of Indian attacks, the brave defence of her father's little fort by Madeleine de Verchères,

the martyrdoms of the Jesuit Fathers, and many other noted scenes, receive a place in this epic of French Canada.

Although, marred by the hysterical extremes in which, at times, he overstates the cult of France and rejects all that can be called real loyalty to the Dominion and justice to British liberty and generosity, it must be remembered that he wrote, a generation ago, under circumstances of temporary personal and racial excitement which have since given place to more sober thought, and that he by no means represented in these things a large and responsible section of his countrymen. Making this due allowance for the point of view, we can read with appreciation several well-told incidents of the "Légende."

Both he and the extreme school of nationalists have atoned for these outbursts by sincerely friendly utterances in later times, and one of the most interesting testimonies to the Great Mother (Victoria) is that penned by Fréchette himself.

The lines entitled "Fors l'Honneur" will serve as an example of the narratives of the Légende. I give it in the translation of the late Gustavus W. Wicksteed, K.C., a brilliant centenarian:

"Our conquerors were masters of the ground;
Close pent in Montreal, the brave Vaudreuil,
After seven years of glory and of suffering,
Seeing no hope of succour sent by France,
Heart-broken by despair, capitulated;
And the proud enemy had stipulated
(Shame makes my cheek burn while I mention it)
That on the following morn, at break of day,

Our brave defenders, penned like timid sheep,
Should into English hands deliver up
Their colours—colours whose folds, proud and free,
Had for a century held their own against
A world in arms, throughout a continent:
Whose onward sweep, still bearing the impress
Of the great epic contest of the past,
During a hundred years from pole to line,
Bore them in front of conquering battalions;

* * * * *

That night, with shame and grief a last adieu,
Indignant at the odious compromise,
Lévis, the truest knight of that dark time,
Fire in his eyes, his hand upon his sword,
Rose sudden, and without long argument
Against the insult proudly made protest.
Upon the plain were twenty thousand foes
Encamped; the ruins of an army, all
He had, upon St. Helen's Isle; no matter—
Soldiers of France had often fought before
With ten to one against them, and had won.
If France uncaring leaves us to our fate,
No matter still—we die when duty calls.
His voice was for resistance to the death:
Withdrawing to the island, there would he
Stand firm and fight, a hero to the last.

* * * * *

Yet Vaudreuil signed. Refusal to obey
Were worse than death—were treason to his chief;
So thought our warrior irreproachable,—

And in the dark hours that precede the dawn,
He to his soldiers stirring in the night
Gave that command, 'The colours to the front!'
To give them up? Would he before the eyes

Of his old comrades work such deed of shame—
Soil his escutcheon with so foul a blot?
Heart-broken they await the dreaded word.
Lévis comes forward; in his kindling eye,
Reflecting the fierce blaze, his soldiers see,
Despite his calm, a scalding tear. Toward
The colours draped in black, with a slow step
He marches, and while History's muse records
His act, he with his arms crossed on his breast,
Fronting the colours with such glory crowned,
Stands looking on them long and fixedly.

* * * * *

And striving to control his mighty grief,
He bows upon the golden fleurs de lys,
And in the agony of a last embrace
Covers each flag with kisses of farewell.
'Now burn them boys, before another hand
Can give them up unto our English foes.'
Then, sight sublime and strange, like a vast wave
Sinking in silence, knelt that warrior band,
And solemnly into the sacred fire,
Which, amid sounds as of death rattle, shot
Spirals of blood-red flame in eddying whirls
Into the firmament, amid the rush
Of glowing ashes, one by one were thrown,
Under the hero's eye, grave as a saint's,
The colours he had loved so long and well.
Some few slight cracklings more, and all was done,
From Montreal, Longueuil, and every point,
The hostile posts believed that in the storm
They heard loud shouts of triumph; 'twas the shout
Of the proud vanquished, who in their despair
Cried to night's answering echoes, 'Vive la France!'"

Of recent years Fréchette has been finding appreciation in the English-speaking world, to which he has not been unresponsive.

The poets have left me only a brief space to deal with the historians.

François Xavier Garneau, a notary by profession, and Secretary of the Municipality of Quebec, was born there in 1809. He was the first writer of really brilliant parts produced by the race, but he suffered from some limitations through being self-educated. In 1845, after several years in Europe, he published the first edition of his 'Histoire du Canada,' in three volumes, of which in after years three other editions were issued in French and two in an English translation. Of the latter his friends repeated the adage *traduttore traditore.*

Garneau was the first to bring together the scattered materials of Canadian history into a digested whole. Besides being marked by considerable precision of style and a share of elegance, it was a work of erudition and of great independence of thought—so much, in fact, that the opposition of the clergy of the day compelled the excerption of certain passages, which consequently do not appear in the later editions. In spite of this freedom of thought, he fell into some of the sentimental bitterness of his narrower compatriots at that time in his references to the British. In his preface of 1859 he defends himself in these words: "To the cause embraced by me in this book—the preservation of our religion, language, and laws—belongs to-day our own destiny. In persevering in the traditions of our fathers, I have become the adversary of the policy of England, which has placed the two Canadas under one Government with the purpose of destroying these three great features of the existence of the

French-Canadian, and perhaps I have also thereby drawn upon myself the antipathy of those among our compatriots who have become the partisans of that policy. I can say, nevertheless, that in what I have written I have been inspired by no motive of hostility to anyone. I have but expressed the deep sympathies of my heart for a cause which rests upon all there is of most holy and venerable in the eyes of all peoples. I do not ignore the consequences to me of this attachment to repudiated sentiments. I know that, defying the decrees of an all-powerful metropolis, I am regarded as the propagator of fatal doctrines, and by the French-Canadians attached to the Government which it imposes upon us as the blind disciple of a race destined to perish. I am consoled by the conviction that I am following an honourable road, and am sure that, while I do not enjoy the splendour of power and fortune, the conqueror cannot but respect the motive which inspires me." In 1866 Garneau passed away, after many years of illness, relieved, however, by a great repute among his people and by their support in many ways. He had attained his purpose of aiding greatly in developing a sentiment of separatism among them, a course in which he felt justified according to the lights of his education.

Benjamin Sulte, the other writer whom I have chosen as a representative historian, is living to-day. He also, though self-educated, is a man of erudite and systematic thoroughness. But his views are broader; his liberal, fraternal instinct breaks down all barriers of racial prejudice, and his common sense rationalises, without destroying, his sentiment. Last

year he made a highly popular President of the Royal Society of Canada. He has frequently spoken the word of goodwill and harmony which is the solution of racial friction in Quebec as elsewhere. His most important book is 'L'Histoire des Canadiens Français,' a work replete with brilliant insight and original research, for Sulte is nothing if not original.

Besides the 'Histoire' he is the author of numerous fine, historical monographs, and of a good deal of interesting prose miscellany, and some verse.

In naming but four of the French-Canadian writers, I have consulted space rather than paucity of matter; for an entire paper of interest could be written of the work of each of a number of others—such as the interesting and valuable antiquarian reminiscences of Aubert de Gaspé, the lyrics of Routhier, the unique genealogical repertory of Abbé Tanguay, the prose folklore of Beaugrand, the collection of *chansons* of Ernest Gagnon, the historical works of Abbé Casgrain, Richard the Acadian, and several others, not to speak of the tendencies of a cloud of minor authors or the abiding interest of the Jesuit 'Relations,' Charlevoix's 'Histoire de la Nouvelle France,' and other original sources.

If no genius of the first rank has been produced, no prose romance of serious importance, no criticism, there has been at least a sufficient expression of the primary impulses of a peculiarly situated people. If all their goslings are swans, they have shown a most laudable respect for even the appearance of learning, and this has been followed by substantial rewards in the form of Civil Service posts, and that unusual position of influence [illegible]e statesmen

which, to its honour, is a characteristic of the French race.

The existence of this population has had the good effect upon Canada of a great and constant training in political and social liberality: their history has added a rich dower of romance; and ultimately, when the imperfect, scarcely begun, union of the races of to-day shall have become the complete fusion of the future, this little literature will be a mine of historical instruction and human interest.